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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AVIAN INFLUENZA IN BANGLADESH ONLY A MATTER OF TIME?

REF: NEW DELHI 7199

Sensitive but unclassified

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: There is currently no indication of avian influenza (AI) in Bangladesh. Conditions, however, are ripe for the emergence of AI: Almost no general public awareness of the problem; very poor public health infrastructure; a government without the political will to make and enforce unpopular decisions necessary to contain an outbreak; no livestock insurance for farmers instructed to destroy infected flocks; open chicken houses, even on large farms; porous national borders; a black market trade in Indian chicks, eggs and illegally made avian influenza vaccines; and avian influenza in most, if not all, countries surrounding Bangladesh. BDG steps to prevent infection are largely limited to poorly enforced restrictions on import of chicks from infected countries. There are signs, however, that the BDG is beginning to understand the risks posed by AI. END SUMMARY.

POULTRY: A KEY PROTEIN SOURCE

12. (U) Chicken, being the cheapest meat available, has outpaced fish as the most common source of high-quality protein for Bangladeshis. One poultry farm owner estimated that about 30 eggs and about 1.5 kilograms of chicken are consumed per person per year. (COMMENT: This is an extremely small amount but, though it masks the higher consumption levels of the better-off, it tracks with the general food insecurity of the impoverished half of Bangladesh's population. END COMMENT.) Another farmer estimated that a given family of poor Bangladeshis would eat chicken as their protein source about four times a week. Another four times a week the same family will consume dal, a lentil/pulse-based soup that is an excellent source of vegetable protein.

AND A THRIVING NEW INDUSTRY FOR BANGLADESH

13. (U) In the last 10 to 15 years, the poultry industry in Bangladesh has grown from about two million "broilers" (chickens grown for eventual consumption) in 1992 to approximately 250 million produced per year in 2003. At any one time, there are about 20 million broiler chickens in Bangladesh. This figure does not include egg producing "layers" or stock chicks. Syed Abu Siddique, the Secretary General of the Bangladesh Poultry Industries Association and the Managing Director of Silver Carp Ltd. poultry farm, estimates that about 3.5 million people are involved in the direct production of poultry in Bangladesh.

14. (U) The BDG has made an effort to strengthen the poultry farming industry in Bangladesh, granting it tax-free status. The industry also benefits from the 2004 ban on imported poultry, eggs, and stock chicks from nine surrounding countries, which the BDG believes to be infected with AI, including India. Thailand has recently begun exporting cooked chicken but has not been able to return to the export of live chickens, eggs or parent stock.

15. (U) Following the January 23, 2004 announcement that AI was confirmed in Thailand after months of speculation, the bottom fell out of the poultry industry in South East Asia, including Bangladesh. A confused local population, deprived of high quality information and aware that the government of Thailand had long fought the truth of an AI infection within its own borders, assumed that "if it can happen there, it can happen here" and took no chances with the veracity of the BDG.

16. (SBU) The resulting boycott of poultry sold in Bangladesh, regardless of source, lasted for several months. Kazi Farm, the largest producer of stock chicks and poultry feed and the only poultry exporter in Bangladesh, was forced to destroy 8.6 million chicks to avoid huge losses from feeding and raising them. Poultry purchases have returned to normal and Bangladesh is now facing a higher demand for chicks than local producers can supply, a situation that Kazi Farms says will be rectified no later than November of this year, when their growing flocks begin laying. Kazi Zahin Hasan, the farm's Director and son of the founder, believes

that within 6 to 12 months, local supplies of chicks for stock will be enough that there will no longer be a need for imports from India, which some farmers are pressing for. Mr. Siddique of Silver Carp agrees that production in the industry as a whole could be tripled in the same period if demand were to increase.

#### RISKS FOR BANGLADESH

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17. (U) According to a Wetlands International map of migration routes, migratory birds, which are believed to be the primary reservoirs of H5N1, fly yearly through Russia, China and India. Russia and China have both had confirmed outbreaks of H5N1. India claims to remain free of the virus but, even if HPAI (Highly-Pathogenic Avian Influenza) is not present in India, the presence of LPAI is cause for serious concern.

18. (U) An outbreak of AI in Bangladesh would likely devastate the domestic poultry industry. While destruction of commercial flocks would be a straightforward process to execute, requiring little technical expertise, political pressures and corruption might delay or prevent the destruction of some flocks, allowing the disease to spread further. These problems would be magnified in rural areas throughout the country, where there are large numbers of small flocks, making containment and eradication difficult.

19. (U) Even more worrisome would be the emergence of human AI infections in Bangladesh, even if only mildly contagious. Bangladesh is the most densely populated nation on earth. Access to safe sanitation and clean water are problematic for much of the population, which often suffers from inadequate food and nutrition as well, making them potentially more susceptible to disease. These conditions would be expected to facilitate the spread of any human AI infection in Bangladesh

#### TO IMPORT OR NOT TO IMPORT: POLITICS AND THE SPREAD OF DISEASE

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10. (SBU) Whether or not Bangladesh is to import any poultry from India or if it is to rely on a homegrown industry is of central importance regarding the prevention of an AI outbreak here. Available scientific evidence, including published test results from the central Indian animal testing laboratory in Bhopal, points to the presence of Low-Pathogenic Avian Influenza (LPAI) in India. Swabs from Indian farm workers in Chennai, taken in 2000 and tested both in India and at the CDC, indicate the presence of H5N1, the most virulent strain known of AI and the most likely to kill humans. However, CDC experts reported to New Delhi's Health Attache that the results of their assays, though troubling, did not confirm the presence of H5N1 in Indian poultry or poultry workers at this time. (RefTel).

11. (U) Vaccines are now routinely produced on the black market in India that supposedly protect against both Newcastle, a common poultry disease that is not dangerous to humans, and AI. The AI protection is not legal and so it is not listed on the bottle, instead the vaccine is called "anti-variant" and it is not produced according to OIE standards (World Organization for Animal Health), the world body that monitors livestock health. Dr. MM Khan, a veterinarian and respected animal health researcher at Advance Animal Science Co. Ltd., a Bangladeshi purveyor of animal nutrition additives, chicken vaccines and medicines, reported in two studies that he passed to EconOff in hard copy, that vaccines he obtained from these "backdoor" Indian operators caused the chickens he tested them on to begin producing antigen to AI, as is expected.

12. (SBU) Unfortunately, as a result of poor production practices and uncontrolled variations in the amount of AI virus in these vaccines, it is entirely possible that these vaccines could also serve as infectious agents. Dr. Khan claims that the head of Hester Pharmaceuticals in India, an animal vaccine manufacturer, recently infected himself and his test flock with AI while trying to produce an illegal vaccine with a higher titre level (in an attempt to increase protection against the disease) and ended up in the hospital. EconOff did not attempt to independently verify the veracity of this report.

13. (U) Following the 2004 outbreak of AI in Thailand, Bangladesh banned poultry and stock chick imports from nine South and East Asian countries, including India. In the last year, India has faced a surplus of stock chicks, having lost the Bangladesh export market, and its farmers are desperate to relieve themselves of produce. The GOI is putting pressure on the Minister of Livestock, the government official responsible for the ban, to lift restrictions on imports of stock chicks from India.

14. (SBU) There are three major producers of grandparent stock chicks that supply the rest of the world. These

companies are located in Europe, North America and India. MM Aga Khan Farms in Chittagong, the home district of the Livestock Minister, prefers to purchase its grandparent stock chicks from India due to the cheaper prices. Other large farms, Kazi farms included, complain that this is irresponsible due to the long-term loss that faces the entire poultry industry if AI in form, LPAI or HPAI, crosses Bangladesh's borders.

#### MONITORING AND PRIVATE SECTOR INITIATIVES

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15. (U) While there is an adequate livestock disease monitoring laboratory infrastructure in Bangladesh, according to the owner of the largest poultry farm in Bangladesh, Kazi Farms, it is of little use to those producers that can afford it because there is no confidentiality of test results. For small farm owners, the costs of the government laboratories simply put them out of reach entirely. This means that large farms create their own laboratories that may or may not provide surveillance information to the OIE, and small farms simply do not test.

16. (U) Kazi farms is leading an initiative to introduce livestock insurance to protect farmers that are required to destroy their flocks; however, it has garnered almost no support among the various poultry breeder and farmer associations. Kazi Farms' has suggested that a tax be imposed on the sale of chicks and feed between large farms and that the funds from this tax go to a National Livestock Insurance Policy and AI surveillance system. Kazi Zahin Hasan, Director of Kazi Farms, explains that the purchase of chicken by the consumer need not have an additional tax, only the sale of stock and supplies within the industry. (COMMENT: This does not mean that the added cost of an internal tax on a currently tax-free industry would not be passed on to the consumer. END COMMENT.)

17. (SBU) The majority of the opposition to this plan comes from smaller farms. Kazi points out, however, that these farms are not registered with the government and so are not traceable for tax purposes. It is only the large farms, which must register in order to qualify for business loans from government banks, which would be vulnerable to any taxation system. These large farms, Kazi argues, can bear the expense. In the event of an AI outbreak, an increasingly likely event, the large farms in particular cannot afford to ignore the need for livestock insurance funded by a tax or some other private procurement, Kazi points out.

18. (SBU) Without compensation for destroyed chickens, no one interviewed by EconOff expects that farmers would actually comply with destruction orders. Dr. MM Khan opined that farmers required to dispose of infected birds would probably sell them and then claim to have destroyed them. He stated that they might do this anyway, even with livestock insurance, thereby getting paid both by the government and by a buyer.

#### BDG RESPONSE MINIMAL, BUT CHANGING

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18. (U) According to a wide array of industry contacts, the Minister of Livestock and Fisheries is proactive on the issue of AI. He enacted the nine-country ban in 2004 that is largely responsible for protecting Bangladesh's poultry industry from infection. He has been, up to now, the only high level BDG official interested in the issue. However, with recent WHO guidelines and USG-generated UNGA publicity on the issue, the Health Minister has shown recent interest in the issue as well.

19. (SBU) Recent attempts by EconOff to meet with the Minister of Livestock, supposedly an accessible official, and a Director General at the Ministry of Environment, were canceled at the last minute by both ministries. EconOff will continue to attempt to meet with officials at all four relevant ministries: Livestock, Health, Agriculture and Environment.

#### COMMENT

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20. (SBU) "Catastrophe" is probably not an understatement for an avian influenza outbreak in Bangladesh. An industry would be wiped out and a source of additional income and protein for small-scale occasional farmers would be gone. Added food insecurity would only ripen the ground for human infections if the virus form that arrives is capable of crossing the species barrier. Even if an early strain of AI in Bangladesh is not initially contagious to humans, all expert evidence examined by EconOff indicates that it could quickly and easily become so.

21. (SBU) Apart from the Livestock Ministry, the BDG has taken little interest in AI. That seems to be changing, as

other ministries begin to understand the potential impact of a confirmed AI infection in Bangladesh. Embassy reporting on preventive measures in place and likely government response to an outbreak will be forthcoming as information becomes available.

CHAMMAS